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ABSTRACT

The main reasons that adults participate in education are as follows: achieve personal goals/satisfaction, prepare to change careers, or advance in a current career. Adults in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups constitute 59% of all adult learners. Of those groups, the 25-34 age group is more degree-oriented because of concern with earning the qualifications required for an employment choice or higher earnings. As adults age, they enter a "maintenance phase" of their work lives, see their careers in a more balanced perspective, and begin investing less of their ego and energy into the work world. Consequently, among adults aged 35 or older, desire for credit or certification decreases steadily with increasing age. Adult education providers seeking to promote greater participation of adult students in undergraduate degree programs must consider and speak to the different motivations and developmental tasks of adult learners in different age groups. To adults in the 35-44 age group, undergraduate degree programs should be promoted as a way of fulfilling personal goals, obtaining satisfaction and support, and gaining opportunities for socializing by interacting with other learners. Because those who are better educated tend to participate in adult learning activity, the adult education provider should recruit future learners from the pool of current learners. (MN)

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ED 412 354

ADULT EDUCATION:

WHO PARTICIPATES AND WHY.

HOW PROVIDERS OF ADULT EDUCATION CAN CREATE A CLIMATE CONDUCIVE TO PROMOTING GREATER PARTICIPATION IN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMS.

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Introduction

Because participation in adult education is largely voluntary, it is important for providers of adult education to ". . . know who is participating, why they are participating, and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 62).

Who are adult learners? Why do adults choose to learn? What developmental tasks do adults need to accomplish? What are the implications of knowing the theories of motivation and development of adult learners for adult education practitioners? It is the intent of this author to present a profile of adult learners, an overview of the reasons why adults choose to participate and the developmental tasks which they are trying to accomplish. I plan to discuss my own research as it relates to the above and then explore the significance of the theories for providers of adult education.

Adult Education: Who Participates

Adult learners are defined in a variety of ways by different researchers. In 1965, Johnstone and Rivera defined an adult learner as anyone either twenty-one or over, married, or the head of a household who is engaged in an activity (full-time or part-time) who's main purpose is the acquiring of knowledge, skill, or information and includes some form of instruction (including self-instruction) (pp. 26 and 35). Subsequent studies undertaken by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defined an adult learner as someone, age 17 or older and <u>not</u> a full-time student, who self-defines and reports an activity as

adult education. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) surveyed adults twenty-five and older.

Despite the variety of definitions of who is an adult learner, a generic profile of adult learners has emerged. The traits of a broadly defined "typical" adult learner, as compared to the general population of adults, are: better educated, younger, have higher than average income, white and employed full-time, live in suburbia, have been out of school for approximately five years, and slightly more are women than men (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 64). While a profile of the typical learner obscures differences and can not encompass all learners it does give one a starting point from which to view adult learners. The focus of this paper, however, is on participants in adult education for academic credit. Therefore, a more specific profile is necessary.

Cross (1981) adds to the generic profile of an adult learner by citing several studies of adults who participate in learning for academic credit. The following profile is summarized from pp. 67-79 of Adults as Learners by K. Patricia Cross (1981). The profile of degree seeking adults appears to be that of a privileged group when compared with the general population of adult learners. Many hold better jobs and are better educated than their age counterparts in the general population. Although they tend to be first-generation college students, they are "determined to rise above the socioeconomic level of their parents, largely through the route of advanced education" (p. 67).

According to Cross, Roelfs (1975) study showed adult students are more likely

> to know what they want out of college, to be challenged rather than bored with their classes, to feel self-confident about their ability to keep up with their studies and to understand what is being taught, to spend more time studying, and to express satisfaction with their classes and their instructors. (Cross, 1981, pp. 70)

Sosdian and Sharp (1978) studied some 1,500 graduates of degree programs designed for adult learners and found the learners were mostly employed in professional, sub-professional, and technical jobs (54 percent) and were well educated before they entered the degree program; 82 percent had previously attended college, and 27 percent already had college degrees (Cross, 1981, pp. 70).

Adult Education: Why Adults Participate

Having looked at a profile of adult learners it is important to turn to the reasons why the adult learner chooses to learn. What are the learner's motivations for choosing to participate? What are the learner's goals? What are the major developmental tasks the learner is attempting to accomplish?

The first major national study of the motivations of adult learners was conducted by Johnstone and Rivera in 1965. This survey showed that the number one reason adults chose to learn was for personal goals/satisfaction.

The second highest reason was to prepare to change careers and the third highest reason was to advance in a current career.

In 1978, Sosdian and Sharp cited graduates as reporting "the personal satisfaction of having pursued and completed their college degrees was far and away the most important goal for adults pursuing external degrees, followed by having the credential as a prerequisite to further study and job advancement" (Cross, 1981, p. 73).

Little has changed since the first national study by Johnstone and Rivera in the 1960's (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 74). Merriam & Caffarella's view is supported by this author's study of the adult learners in George Fox University's (GFU) Boise Center undergraduate degree-completion program (DeJoy, 1996, October, pp. 9-14).

This author's 1996 survey of adult learners showed results similar to the 1965 Johnstone and Rivera study. When asked to cite their primary reason for returning to college, 60 percent of the adult learners in GFU's program reported personal goal/satisfaction. Twenty percent reported they returned to college in order to change careers and twelve percent cited advancement in their current career as their primary reason. The remaining eight percent of George Fox University students cited their desire to go on to graduate school as the primary reason. Graduate school was not listed as a choice by Johnstone and Rivera in their 1965 study.

The consistency of results from the 1965 Johnstone and Rivera study and this author's 1996 study is interesting. Over the course of three decades

adult learners continue to participate in adult education for largely the same reasons.

In addition to the reasons given above, transitions across the lifespan are also cited as reasons for learning. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found 83 percent of learners cited a change in their life as the reason for choosing to participate in adult education. Most of the transitions are work or family related. The authors conclude, "To know an adult's life schedule is to know an adult's learning schedule" (pp. 60-61).

Let's turn our focus on lifespan development to the two largest groups of adult learners, those age 25-34 and those age 35-44. Together these two groups or "cohorts" make up 59 percent of all adult learners (U.S. Department of Education, 1986).

According to Cross (1981), the younger cohort is degree oriented. Cross's view is consistent with the major theories of lifespan development. The 20's are a time to begin making choices regarding further education and employment specialization (Berger, 1994). The choices require a 20-something year old learner to be degree oriented in order to be able to qualify for an employment choice.

As men and women approach their 30's, they begin to reexamine and question previous commitments and career goals. Women begin to see the possibility of having more time to themselves now that their children are becoming more independent and begin to see that children become more costly to raise as they grow older. As men approach their 30's they seek

greater independence from their supervisors and ask for more responsibility at work. This transition into their 30's can cause women and men to be degree oriented as they attempt to either reenter or advance in the job market (Berger, 1994).

Conversely, as Cross (1981) states, "the desire for credit or certification [i.e., degree orientation] declines steadily with increasing age. The research into lifespan development supports this contention as well. The learners in the 35-44 age cohort have different developmental tasks to accomplish. They

> enter the 'maintenance phase' of their work lives, as they achieve a career plateau. They see their career in a more balanced perspective, no longer wanting achievement for achievement's sake. When this happens, workers generally invest less of their ego and energy in the work world; they can afford to be more relaxed in their approach to their job, more satisfied with the work itself, more helpful to others. (Berger, 1994, pp. 571-572)

With this reduced focus on career advancement comes less of a need to earn a degree or certification.

The theoretical developmental tasks of the two cohorts and the cohort's respective motivations for returning to college are further confirmed by this author's research. In my survey of adult learners (1996, October) I divided the participants into two nearly equal cohorts; those learners born before 1960 and those born after 1959. I found that a greater percentage of learners in the younger cohort, as compared to the learners in the older cohort, cited career

advancement and continuing on to graduate school as their primary reason for returning to college. Conversely, those learners in the older cohort cited personal goal/satisfaction as their primary reason for returning to college more often than did the younger learners (DeJoy, p. 13).

Creating a Climate Conducive to Greater Participation

Having obtained a profile of who an adult learner is and having studied reasons why the learner is volunteering to participate, a provider of adult education can use this information to create conditions which are likely to promote greater participation.

In addition to focusing on the demographic information provided as part of the adult learner profile, the adult education provider should recognize the motivations and developmental tasks of the learners. In this manner, the adult education provider will have a better understanding of his/her audience and be better able to speak to their needs. Adult education providers can apply this knowledge of adult learners in their interaction with potential learners.

For example, when working with a potential learner who is in the younger cohort (age 25-34), which represent 34 percent of all adult learners (U.S. Department of Education, 1986), the adult education provider should recognize that this person is mostly likely interested in a degree. Therefore, the provider of adult education should emphasize the potential to earn a degree and the possible rewards that come with the completion of a college degree (e.g.,

promotion, new job). The adult education provider's task is to inform the potential learner as to how their goal of completing the degree can be accomplished.

To a potential learner in the older cohort (age 35-44), which represents 25 percent of all adult learners (U.S. Department of Education, 1986), the adult education provider should recognize that this learner may not need a degree and that the degree may not bring the same monetary rewards that it might to a younger learner, but the older learner may want the degree to fulfill a personal goal and/or obtain a measure of personal satisfaction. Therefore, the adult education provider should emphasize to the learner that they will be able to fulfill a personal goal, obtain satisfaction and support, and a measure of socializing by interacting with the other learners.

In keeping with the goal of promoting greater participation, the provider of adult education should not limit the search for future learners solely to new learners. Rather, because learning is addictive and because those who are better educated tend to participate in adult learning activity (Cross, 1981), the adult education provider should recruit future learners from the pool of current learners.

For example, assuming the current learners are learning from curriculum designed for adults, the research suggests the adult learners will be motivated to participate in future learning. Therefore, the provider of adult education should provide additional learning opportunities for current learners. Examples of additional learning opportunities could include: additional single

courses, courses in a different but related subject area such as a minor related to the major field of study, advanced course work in the current field of study, and/or special topics courses.

The recruitment of current learners for future adult education opportunities is independent of cohort differences. The learners in the younger cohort may be motivated to continue to complete a degree and to gain additional knowledge in order to help them in their career. The learners in the older cohort may be motivated to continue to complete a degree and to gain additional knowledge in order to satisfy their personal goals and to continue to obtain the support and socialization that comes from interacting with other learners. Despite the differences in the reasons for their motivation, members across cohorts will remain motivated to learn.

Summary and Suggestion for Future Research

In studying a profile of the adult learner and the reasons why adults choose to participate in learning, I have laid a theoretical foundation from which to view potential learners. This foundation is further enhanced by my recent research. By relating the "who and why" to the theories of lifespan development I have shown how the theories can be applied to increase participation in adult education opportunities.

Future research should continue to explore and define the profile of an adult learner participating in adult education for academic credit and, more specifically, one who is participating in order to complete his/her degree.

Further research into why adults choose to participate, why they choose not to participate, and what conditions would promote greater participation is also necessary.

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